

## Experiencing the Holy Spirit's Presence

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Powerful Encounters in the Book of Acts

Acts 2

Over the past few months I did a series called “Christ Confronts the Culture” in which I addressed a number of the dominant cultural issues that we face as Americans entering the new millenium. I talked about post-modernism and pluralism, the sexual revolution, evolution and feminism.

In many ways our post-Christian, postmodern culture resembles the pre-Christian pre-modern culture that existed when the gospel first burst on the scene 2,000 years ago. People then and now lost their confidence in the Roman and Greek Pantheons—Zeus, Poseidon, Venus, Hermes—people didn’t believe in them anymore. Now folks have stopped believing in government, in inevitable progress, in science or technology’s ability to solve everything.

Then they lived in a world dominated by Roman military power and Greek culture. Now we live in a world dominated by the American military and American culture. Then the whole known world spoke Greek; now the world speaks English.

[NOTE] The emotional tone of their world was pessimistic even as many people experienced prosperity and the emotional tone of our world is pessimistic even while the economy hums along.

Then people were on a spiritual journey of exploration—they were searching for new gods, new answers—the gods of the East were especially attractive. Now more and more Americans are searching for spiritual answers and are also turning eastward toward the New Age gods and toward eastern practices like meditation and yoga.

How did the early church turn the Greco-Roman world upside down? Certainly, part of their success lay in their message—that through Christ people could find freedom and salvation from all the things that held them in fear and bondage. Certainly if the church today wants to succeed we must communicate in a fresh way that people can find freedom from fears and addictions, from depression and hopelessness. People can find freedom through Christ.

But it wasn’t just the early church’s message that made them such a success. The early church was empowered by a vital experience of God—the Holy Spirit’s presence.

See, throughout history what has made the difference over and over again in the life of the church and its effectiveness in the world has been the experience of the Holy Spirit’s presence. It is natural then that after considering our culture for a few months, we take our thinking to the next level and consider how our church and we as individuals can grow in our experience of the Holy Spirit’s presence; if we wish to.

What I plan to do is take some highlights from the Book of Acts where we will discover several things.

First of all, we’re going to discover that the Holy Spirit is the star of the book of Acts. Since, about the middle of the second century this book we’re going to be looking at

was call the Acts of the Apostles, but it could just as easily or better be named the Acts of the Holy Spirit because the Holy Spirit shows up at least 5 dozen times. And it was the rediscovery of the Book of Acts at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that lead to the greatest expansion of the Christian church in our entire history with the birth of the Pentecostal, charismatic, and third wave movements or what I've labeled "empowered evangelical movement." According to David Barrett who is the leading expert on the growth of Christianity in the 20<sup>th</sup> century worldwide. According to David Barrett, there are now about 600,000,000 people worldwide who are part of the Pentecostal, charismatic, or third wave, empowered evangelical wings of the Christian church. In other words, 30% of all the people in the world who identify even loosely with Christianity are Pentecostal, charismatic, or empowered evangelicals. And that number is growing much faster than the growth of the world's population. It's growing far faster than the growth of Islam or any other religion in the world. And that number is growing much faster than the growth of any other segment of Christianity. You wanted to invest in a growth stock for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a sure bet, cast your lot with the Holy Spirit wing of the Christian church. That's where all the growth is and that's where all the growth will continue to be. And all of this growth started as people at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century rediscovered the Book of Acts, a message about the Holy Spirit's presence.

Luke, who wrote the book of Acts along with the gospel of Luke, is often called the theologian of the Holy Spirit because the Holy Spirit shows up so prominently in the gospel of Luke and in his second volume, the book of Acts. As Luke writes about Jesus of Nazareth, what stands out most about Jesus of Nazareth is that he is a Holy Spirit saturated man. His human life was created in the womb of the Virgin Mary, how? According to the book of Luke, it was when the Holy Spirit overshadowed Mary. The human life of Jesus of Nazareth was literally created in the womb by the direct act of the Holy Spirit. And, the ministry of Jesus Christ began when Jesus was baptized in the Holy Spirit in the river Jordan.

And then, we read about how Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness in Luke 4. And he came back in the power of the Spirit. His entire ministry was done in the power of the Holy Spirit. If you look at Luke 4, in Jesus' inaugural address, he says that "the Spirit of the Lord is upon me because the Lord has anointed me to do three things: to preach, to cast out demons and to heal the sick." Jesus is raised from the dead by the Holy Spirit. And the final activity of Jesus is to pour the Spirit out upon his people from heaven. Jesus Christ's whole life, death, resurrection and ascension is all about the Holy Spirit. That's why he's called the Christ. Christ isn't Jesus' last name. Christ or *Christos* is the Greek translation of the Hebrew word Messiah. It means anointed one. Jesus was the one who was anointed to be the bearer of the Holy Spirit. And when people become Christians, Jesus invites them into his Holy Spirit anointed community. They become bearers of the Holy Spirit. That's what the book of Acts is about. How you and I get to be carriers of the Holy Spirit's presence, following in the footsteps of our Christ, who is the supreme, ultimate, bearer of the Holy Spirit. The book of Acts presents us with a model of Christianity, which goes like this.

Apart from the Holy Spirit, we Christians have nothing. Very simple formula. Book of Acts, that stars the Holy Spirit, communicates a simple message to Christians, that apart from the Holy Spirit, we Christians have nothing and are nothing and do nothing. Our coming to Jesus is the product of the Holy Spirit. Our Christian growth is a result of

the Holy Spirit, our unity in the church—created by the Holy Spirit. Our evangelism is empowered by the Holy Spirit. Our knowledge of God's word is a result of the Holy Spirit. Our hearing from God, our healing, our casting out of demons, the restoration of marriages and families, our insight into the things of God. Our servanthood, our Christian character. It's all the results of the Holy Spirit. The Christian life is life in the Spirit. It's life following Jesus the Christ who lived His life in the Holy Spirit. Today we're going to explore some dimensions of the Spirit Life, which is the Christian life, in a message from Acts, Chapter 2, which I've called "Experiencing the Holy Spirit's Presence." Let's pray.

If you have a Bible I would like you to open up to Acts 2, where we read:

"When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them."

Here is a marvelous encounter with the Holy Spirit that takes place it says in v. 1, "On the day of Pentecost...when the day of Pentecost came." Pentecost is a word that comes from the Greek word "pentecostos" which means 50<sup>th</sup> - 50 days after the Sunday that follows Passover. So you have Passover and then you go to the next Sunday after Passover and 50 days after that including that Sunday is Pentecost. Pentecostos means 50<sup>th</sup>. It is called the Feast of Weeks in Judaism – seven weeks after the Passover. And Pentecost or the Feast of Weeks was one of the three Pilgrim Festivals in the Old Testament. You know today how Muslims make a pilgrimage to Mecca. And if they can afford it, a good Muslim is supposed to try to make that pilgrimage once in their lifetime. There were three annual holidays in the Old Testament that Jews, if they could afford it, were to try to go to Jerusalem to the Temple. The three Pilgrim holidays were the Feast of Tabernacles, the Feast of Booths that takes place in the autumn, the Feast of the Passover that takes place usually at the end of March, the beginning of April, and then the Feast of Pentecost that takes place in late May or early June.

And this Feast of Pentecost was a Harvest Festival in which the first fruits of the grain harvest were presented to the Lord. And we are going to see here that the Holy Spirit on Pentecost was given to believers as a sort of first fruits. Just as Pentecost was a first fruits holiday in which the first fruits of the grain harvest was given to the Lord, so on Pentecost in Acts 2 God gives us the first fruits of our inheritance by giving us the Holy Spirit. Pentecost was not only celebrated as a first fruits festival, but Jews always celebrated the holiday as the day when God instituted his covenant with men. In other words God came down and met Moses on Mt. Sinai and gave him the law on the day of Pentecost.

It is interesting that just as God who wrote those laws on tablets of stone on the day of Pentecost, so in Acts 2 God writes his law on the hearts of men and women under a new covenant. And this also takes place on the day of Pentecost. People were initiated into Noah's covenant and the Old Testament covenant on Pentecost and people became initiated into a new covenant on the day of Pentecost. A couple of other traditions – in Morocco, Jews pour pitchers of water over each other on Pentecost which

one writer called a strange and unexplained custom. We'll see it's not so strange in a moment.

The last thing regarding Pentecost is that in Jewish tradition, including today, Jews read the Book of Ruth in Synagogue. Ruth is a book about how God reached beyond the national borders of Israel to incorporate into the nation a young Gentile woman, a woman from the nation of Moab, and brought her into the covenant. And here in Acts 2 we are going to see that much of the Holy Spirit's activity has to do with incorporating in the nations into the plan of God. In sum, if you understand the holiday of Pentecost from an Old Testament perspective – it was a day of first fruits, it was a day of the giving of the law, it was a day of reaching beyond national borders and gaining a global perspective – if you understand the Old Testament holiday of Pentecost, you will understand what is going on in Acts 2 so much better.

Now let's explore the experience that the disciples had with the Holy Spirit. And I use that term "experience" very deliberately because throughout the New Testament the Holy Spirit is not presented to us simply as a doctrine to be added onto the end of a creed. But the Holy Spirit is, rather, presented as God's experienced presence. And I will tell you, friends, too much of Christianity is presented a proposition to be believed. That there are many, many folks out there who have believed a list of things, that their lives are the same. And maybe some of you are like that, where you have been presented with a list of things that you were to believe and it was told to you that if you believed this list that your life would change and your life hasn't changed.

But there is something more to Christianity than something to believe. There is also someone to receive, someone to experience. Now listen, the church has always had creeds. Christianity has a certain truth content to it. But Christianity goes beyond creeds and beyond propositional content. It involves an encounter with the Holy Spirit. As we enter the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, the church has to invite people to start to experience the Holy Spirit, especially since there is a growing hunger in the hearts of many Americans to have spiritual experiences. There is a growing spiritual hunger. I see it in the recent titles in the non-fiction section at Borders Bookstore. There are all these books on spiritual experiences.

There is a growing hunger for experience. Hundreds of thousands are running after the New Age Movement. Others are seeking experience through some sort of artificial stimulant. Maybe some of you were there? You feel dead inside. You haven't felt a vital experience, a vital encounter with God. And so to overcome that deadness, you need some pick-me-up to provide your life with some zip.

And your artificial stimulant, your pick-me-up, the thing that gives you zip is some substance like alcohol or drugs, or maybe a sexually addictive behavior or the use of pornography. Some of you men are surfing the net. Maybe you are in an addictive relationship where you keep looking for something real and vital, but you are looking for it in all the wrong places.

What Christianity offers is an experience, not just a creed, and an experience of God through the Holy Spirit. And what was this experience like on the day of Pentecost? First of all, we read that it was a sudden experience. The Holy Spirit came like a violent wind gusting from heaven. What is being emphasized first of all is that the Holy Spirit does is not subject to human control. This experience happened suddenly,

unexpectedly, like a gust of wind that suddenly blows. These people were just sitting there and then the Spirit of God blew in.

The Holy Spirit's coming, the Holy Spirit's effects, the Holy Spirit's direction is not started by people or controlled by people or governed by people. The origin of the work of the Spirit is in heaven. No one can explain exactly where or when the Holy Spirit is going to move, when God's kingdom is going to come crashing into a place. You can't squeeze the Holy Spirit into a tight little theological box. He constantly jumps out of our boxes, out of all the constraints of church teaching about what God will or will not do in our day.

The most important thing that I see regarding the suddenness of the Spirit's coming, though, is that the Holy Spirit is not subject to human control. See much of modern life is about our desire to control things, to engineer, to manipulate and bring all of the universe under our control. Modern people have reduced everything to a technique. Here is how you manipulate public opinion through focus groups and poll taking and sound bites and advertisements and propaganda. Here is how you manipulate the genetic inheritance of the baby that you are going to have, the sex of the baby, the intelligence and health of the baby. Here is how you manipulate people's emotions by playing certain music, by certain kinds of lighting, by certain voice inflections, by certain visual images. The modern world is all about the human attempt to dominate things, to manipulate things, to discover the technique.

Ultimately the whole modern enterprise is about the human attempt to control everything. That is why as we enter the 21<sup>st</sup> Century so many Americans suffer from anxiety disorders and so many of us require medication for anxiety. We live in an age that suggests that we can be in control of everything and when we can't, we get anxious.

And some people think they can even be in control of what the Holy Spirit does. It is not just very conservative churches that have tried to wall out the Holy Spirit's activity. No, it is not just the conservative church that has tried to be in control. The Pentecostal wing of the church has also suggested human capacity to control by saying, "If you wish to have an experience of the Holy Spirit, do these three, five or seven things – Repent of all known sins, Fast, Wait on God, Go to this meeting, Go to that place." The one thing that I see first of all regarding the Holy Spirit is that we are encountering something and someone who is not subject to our control or manipulation. We are talking about the kingdom of God, God's right to control, God's right to reign. We are talking about a violent wind. Despite the fact that we are so used to being able to bend and twist and shape others by what we do and say, here is someone you can't manipulate someone you can't control. Jesus told Nicodemus in John 3 that "the wind blows where it wills." And you can't tell where it is coming from or where it is going.

This was not just a sudden experience; it was a felt experience. We read, "Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven." The disciples heard something that sounded like a freight train that shook the house.

They not only heard something they saw something. v. 3, "They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them."

There was not only a sound and a sight, but there is also speech. "All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Holy Spirit enabled them."

The Holy Spirit is the experienced presence of God. He is someone who can be felt and who was sent into the world in order to communicate the felt presence of God.

Much of the church today says not to worry about experiences and not to worry about feelings. Concern yourself with the truth and that is enough. Now, on the one hand that is partially right. You don't have to wait for a feeling to obey God, to do what is right and proper and moral. I don't know if God wants me to tell a lie or not. I will just wait around for a feeling regarding whether or not I should lie. Of course, that is nonsense. The Christian life is not just a life of waiting around for a feeling in order to do what is right, good or moral. We act based on the truth. We know what God's Word says – that we are not to tell lies. We know what God's will is and so we do God's will regardless of our feelings.

Nevertheless, if you rarely or never feel God's presence in your life, there is something wrong with that. Yes, the Christian life is not based on feelings, but on the other hand, if feelings don't accompany your relationship with God, then we would say that you have a defective Christian experience. If you don't experience the felt-presence of God, then you are not living New Testament Christianity. God wishes not only to be believed in, but to be encountered and felt.

I have often used this illustration regarding my relationship with my wife, Marlene. It is appropriate that I kiss my wife whether I strongly feel like it in the moment or not. It is appropriate that she kiss me whether she feels like it or not in the moment. But if while kissing we never felt anything, if while I hugged my wife, if I said to her, "Marlene, as I look into your beautiful blue eyes, the only thing that I'm aware of is a deadness in my feelings. Right now I feel towards you cool indifference. I logically and reasonably love you. My emotions are not alive. Rather, I base this next kiss on the truth that you are my wife." You would say that there was something terribly wrong with this relationship.

Now there are lots of reasons why you may find in your life a poverty of feeling regarding your experience of God. Sometimes there is something between you and God that is getting in the way of your feelings. I know there is something between Marlene and I if I've done something to offend her. I'll not feel really great until I take care of the thing that is between us. If you are aware of something between you and God, you need to clear it out of the way through confession and repentance. Deal with that first. Otherwise, like a stopped drain pipe, your feelings will back up. Some of you went to churches where you were told it was positively dangerous to feel anything with God. And so you have been afraid of feeling. And when you began to feel something with God, you shut those feelings down because you have that little voice in your head from your old pastor or leader saying that this was dangerous, despite the fact that the Bible consistently presents the Holy Spirit as someone who can be felt.

What meaning could we give to Peter's statement in 1 Peter 1:8 that through an encounter with God we experience "joy unspeakable" if an encounter with God didn't result in a feeling of joy? Is joy unspeakable merely something we believe or is it something we feel?

What could Paul possibly have meant in Romans 5 when he says, "God's love is poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit?" Is that just doctrine or an experience?

When we read in Romans 8 that we have received the Holy Spirit and by him we cry out, "Abba, Father," the Spirit himself bearing witness with our spirits that we are

children of God” is that heart cry “Abba Father” just a doctrine or it is the result of a genuine encounter with the Holy Spirit.

Some have no feeling of the presence of God because you have been taught that it is dangerous. But the Bible teaches that a felt experience of God is part of the normal Christian life. Emotional control is an extremely high-value item. Some of you struggle in feeling and experiencing God because emotional control is an extremely high value item in your life. Perhaps you were raised in a family that taught you consistently to control your emotions. That people who got emotional were considered to be weaker or less than those whose emotions were totally under control. Or maybe you were raised in a home where emotions were totally out of control and you reacted to that by strong emotional control.

Some people are afraid of feelings and in your fear of feelings you have walled out the felt experience of God. Some people have not felt the presence of God because you have not met the Holy Spirit. You believe in God. You believe in Jesus. But you still have not received the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit comes as the wind.

The wind of the Spirit is always a picture of the renewed life for regenerated life in the Bible. God once brought the prophet Ezekiel to a desert valley that was covered with the bones of dead men. There in the valley many years before and Army had been slaughtered and the bones sat baking and drying in the desert sun. While Ezekiel watched the Spirit of God suddenly blew like a violent wind upon those dried out bones and flesh grew on them and dead men came back to life. This is a picture of regeneration, of the born again experience by God through the Holy Spirit. Some of us are like those dead bones in the valley. We are not physically dead. You may be as physically fit as one could be. You may be intellectually fit. Your mind could be incredibly quick and your wit as sharp as a tack. But even if you are physically alive and intellectually alive, spiritually you can still be dead – that is, dead to God. Dead, in terms of your awareness of God. Dead, in terms of your experience of God before the wind comes to you, this wind that makes you alive to the reality of God.

Let me give you an illustration that I have used in the past. Right now all through the room there are radio signals being beamed even though we can’t see them or feel them or touch them. Radio stations all around the city of Columbus are beaming into this room right now a variety of radio signals. The only way that we could know that the radio signals are being beamed is if we had a radio receiver that is turned on.

But you know human beings are born with a dead radio receiver in their gut as it pertains to God. God is all around us. We can’t see him, taste him, or smell him. Some of you say, “I can’t feel him. I can’t feel his presence.” That is because the radio receiver in your gut, in your spirit, is dead.

Do you know what happens when the wind of the Spirit blows into your life and something called regeneration, the born again experience, God turns that radio receiver on, your being on. And so the result of that is before being born again God seems distant to you. You believe in him, but he seems abstract. He is hard to grasp. He is on planet Mars somewhere. It is hard to lay hold of him. You hear about God, you are reaching out for God, you try to pray to God, but he seems far away and shadowy, elusive, unknown. And when the Holy Spirit regenerates you, you become spiritually alive to God. After regeneration, God feels nearer. He no longer feels abstract, he

feels real. He no longer feels shadowy; he becomes your Father who touches you, who embraces you, who hugs you.

Now some of you might say, "Rich, how can you call what happened to these disciples a regenerating experience? Weren't they regenerated before? Didn't they follow after Jesus? And wasn't their experience of the Holy Spirit subsequent to their regeneration?"

The Holy Spirit was certainly active in the life of the disciples upon whom he fell in power on the day of Pentecost. Jesus said, "No one can come to me unless the Father draws him" in John 6. It is very clear that the men and women who were together and who had this experience of the wind of the Spirit in their lives in Acts 2 – these men and women had come to Jesus and so had previously been drawn to him by the Father. And Peter certainly had insight regarding who Jesus was when he said to Jesus at Caesarea Philippi, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." That was evidence of some kind of work of the Holy Spirit in his heart. Jesus told him, "Flesh and blood hasn't revealed this to you, Peter, but my Father who is in heaven."

The disciples may have had little faith before Pentecost, but they did have faith. But these disciples were standing in a transitional era in terms of the history of salvation. Their experience in the gospels was similar to that of old covenant believers. It isn't true that the Holy Spirit didn't do anything until the day of Pentecost. The believers in the Old Testament had a measure of the Holy Spirit in their lives. But you saw little dominion over the power of Satan in the Old Testament. There was little power for effective evangelism. The old covenant work of the Holy Spirit was entirely confined to the nation of Israel. In terms of the power that was at work in the life of the individual believer and the availability of the Holy Spirit to a broader range of people, we would say that the work of the Spirit in the old covenant believer was of an inferior quality. It was inferior in power. It was inferior in extent and scope.

And in the gospels, I believe that what we see in the lives of the disciples is that the disciples were living as though they were old covenant believers. The Spirit was at work in their lives, but he was at work in the same way that he was at work in the lives of the Old Testament saints. And there was predicted a coming day where under a new covenant the Spirit of God would come in greater power and his work would be far more widespread. Moses prayed for a day when all of God's people would prophesy. Joel prophesied a day when God's spirit would be poured out on all flesh. And Jeremiah predicted a day when the knowledge of God would cover the earth like the waters cover the sea.

So these disciples were standing on that time in history between the old and the new covenant. Yes, the Holy Spirit was active in their lives in the gospels, but he came in greater measure and greater power on the day of Pentecost than they had ever known before. The new covenant power that the disciples received through the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost gave them a greater effectiveness in their witness and their ministry. Jesus said, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you and you will be my witnesses" in Acts 1:8. So they had greater effectiveness in witness and in ministry. They had far more power for victory over the influence of sin in their lives. And they had power for victory over Satan and the forces of darkness. I do not believe that their two-stage experience of the Holy Spirit – one as old covenant believers and one as new covenant believers is a model for us who live on this side of Pentecost. I



don't think the scripture means for the Christian living on this side of Pentecost to come to Jesus believing in him and then later on three years later as in the case of the disciples, to have this so-called baptism in the Holy Spirit.

Baptism in the Holy Spirit, friends, is the initiating experience into the Christian life. It is that experience that brings us to Christ, brings about a sense of the reality of God in our lives, empowers us for Christian service, and incorporates us into the body. Baptism in the Holy Spirit is not an experience subsequent to salvation and regeneration. Baptism in the Spirit is the initial experience of the Spirit that saves a person, puts him or her in the realm of the Spirit brings them into the body.

I want you to see this. Turn with me very quickly to 1 Cor. 12. Here is what we read in 1 Cor. 12:13, Paul writes, "For we were all baptized in or by one Spirit into one body whether Jew or Greek, slave or free, and we were all given the one Spirit to drink."

This baptism in the Holy Spirit, Paul uses the exact same Greek words that John the Baptist used when he said, "I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry, and will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire" (Matt. 3:11). This baptism of the Holy Spirit that John predicted Jesus would do for us, this baptism of the Holy Spirit that happened to the disciples on the day of Pentecost, this baptism of the Holy Spirit that Paul says we have all received, this baptism of the Holy Spirit is the initiating event into the Christian life. It is not an event subsequent to salvation. It is what makes us members of the body of Christ. We were all baptized by one Spirit into one body. It is the activity of the Holy Spirit at the beginning of the Christian life where he gives us new spiritual life cleanses us, gives us a clear break with the power and love of sin.

It is here that I part company with my Pentecostal brothers who say that baptism in the Holy Spirit is something that happens subsequent to conversion. Paul says that we all get this. There aren't some in the church who have it and some who do not. Those of us who are Christians all have been baptized in the Holy Spirit and have drunk of the one Spirit. I am completely opposed to dividing up the church between ordinary Christians and those who have been baptized in the Holy Spirit. I think in this regard my Pentecostal brothers are quite wrong in that they have created by this label "Baptized in the Holy Spirit" a first class and second class kind of Christianity – a sort of we, they mentality in which some of us have been baptized in the Spirit and some have not.

And this has been a problem in the church for centuries where the church has come up with different ways of classifying Christians so that we are not all one body together. The medieval Catholic Church used to break up between the ordinary Christian and the priests and then the monks and the saints. And the holiness branch of the church will sometimes break Christians up between carnal Christians and spiritual Christians or ordinary Christians and sanctified Christians. And the Pentecostals break it up between ordinary Christians and Spirit-filled Christians.

But I don't think the New Testament knows anything of that distinction. We have Christians. Plain Christians who are initiated into the body of Christ by a powerful experience called The Baptism of the Holy Spirit.

Now the New Testament does speak to us about different degrees of maturity among believers and it does tell us that subsequent to our baptism in the Holy Spirit, there are many different empowering experiences that the New Testament calls "fillings with the Holy Spirit." The apostle Peter who was baptized in the Holy Spirit in Acts 2

was filled with the Holy Spirit in Acts 4:8. If you turn there we read, "Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, 'Rulers and elders of the people...'" And filled again in Acts 4:31, "After they prayed the place where they were meeting was shaken and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the Word boldly."

Subsequent to salvation there can be powerful experiences in a believer's life to empower them for service or to give them power over a besetting sin. The New Testament calls that simply "filling."

So the experience of the Spirit is a sudden experience. It is a felt experience. It is a regenerating or baptizing experience. It is also a sanctifying experience, an experience that makes us holy. We read in Acts 2:3, "They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each one of them." The Holy Spirit didn't only come like the wind bringing fresh life; he came like a fire.

Why does it say that the Holy Spirit came like a fire? The Bible often speaks of fire as signaling the presence of God. In Gen. 15 when God appears to Abraham he appears as a smoking pot of fire and a flaming torch. In Ex. 3 when God appears to Moses he comes as a flame of fire from the midst of a bush. We call it the Burning Bush. In Ex. 19 when God visits the people of Israel on Mt. Sinai, he ascends on the mountain in fire. When Ezekiel sees God he says, "He had an appearance of fire around him."

Fire is associated with the presence of God. His throne is fiery flames. His wheels are burning fire according to Daniel. His angelic servants are flames of fire. Before God's throne is a sea of glass mingled with fire. From the throne of God there is a stream of fire. The heavenly chariots that carry God are made of fire.

You know if the 17<sup>th</sup> Century there was a man who was a brilliant philosopher, a mathematician. He also had a great concern for his soul and for his salvation. He conducted mathematical experiments with one of the inventors of calculus. When this man, named Blaise Pascal, died they found he had written something on a bit of paper, which he had sown inside of his coat as a reminder of a remarkable experience he had had. This was what was on the paper:

"This day of grace, 1654, from half past ten at night to about half past midnight – fire. The presence of God came into the room."

And Blaise Pascal, this brilliant mathematician and philosopher saw fire. It goes on to say, "Fire. God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob. Not of the philosophers and the wise. Security, security. Feeling, joy, peace. God of Jesus Christ. Thy God shall be my God. Forgetfulness of the world and of all except God. He can be found only in the ways taught in the gospel. Greatness of the human soul. O righteous Father, the world hath not known Thee, but I have known Thee. Joy, joy, joy, tears of joy running down my face. May I never be separated from you."

Then it goes on like that paragraph after paragraph. Blaise Pascal experienced fire.

Fire signals the presence of God. What does it signal? Fire signals the purifying presence of God. And it signals the destroying presence of God.

Listen, John the Baptist prophesied at the beginning of Jesus' ministry that Jesus would baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. Then Jesus says in Luke 12:49, "I have come to bring fire on earth. How I wish it were already kindled. But I have a baptism to undergo." Here is what Jesus is saying. Jesus is saying that at the cross the destroying fire of God, the fire of judgment, was going to be kindled upon him.

In other words, when Jesus hung on the cross just as he drank from the cup of God's wrath and drained it to the last drop so that the baptism of fire, the fire of God's judgment, was kindled on his body on the cross and extinguished for all who come to him in faith. To those who receive Christ the fire of God fell on Christ in judgment.

And now the fire of God comes to us just in the way of purifying us, cleansing us from sin. To those who don't come to Christ, the fire of God's judgment is going to fall on them ultimately leading to the Lake of Fire that the Bible calls "hell." The experience of the Spirit is a sanctifying one, a purifying one.

See God's Spirit wants to more than simply regenerate you and make you alive. God's Spirit wants to make you holy. And I realize that being made holy is not a very popular concept in today's world or even in the church. If we took a poll and asked what are your top five goals in life? What are the things that you think if they happened to you would make you happy? Many of you would say, "Well, I want to be thinner. I want to be richer. I want to be smarter. Or taller." But more holy? Do you daydream about becoming more holy? When you think, "Wouldn't it be neat if..." do you say to yourself, "Wouldn't it be neat if I were a holier person?" That's what God's Spirit has come to do in your life. That is what the fire that came down was doing in the disciples life.

What is our problem with being made holy? I think we don't understand the word very well. Often when we picture a holy person we picture someone like the Puritans wearing a black coat with a stiff collar. A person who never cracks a smile sitting on a stump of wood sucking a lemon. Maybe you think of a holy man or woman as someone who sits on top of a mountain making pronouncements. Or a holy person as being someone who thinks they are holier than thou judging everyone. Or a holy woman as someone who wears a dress to her ankles and her hair in a bun with no makeup.

Holiness is not something that many Christians aspire to. But it is something we ought to aspire to. Because by holiness in the Bible, the Bible is simply talking about being like Jesus. It is talking about Christ-likeness. The Spirit of God has come to be poured out on us as it was on Jesus to make us look like Jesus. And living like Jesus is a fantastic way to live. To not constantly be in bondage to an addictive behavior. Jesus was free. Jesus was secure. He didn't try to get his identity by what people around him thought. He wasn't always having to prove himself to everyone and everything. He didn't measure his success in life by what he had or what he did. He was at peace with himself. Being like Jesus is a fantastic goal. Because you are aiming at being secure knowing who you are. Jesus was authentic. He was the real deal. Being like Jesus means that you are aiming at being authentic; not being a phony or a hypocrite; not trying to be something that you aren't.

Being like Jesus means that you are aiming at loving other people and not being self-consumed or self-pitying, being self-absorbed, really caring about people. Being able to love people who are different than you. People who are different in color, background, or who have a different education. People who have a different age. Being like Jesus means that you speak well of others instead of always complaining, bad-mouthing or gossiping.

Wouldn't it be nice to live life like Jesus? Secure, content, thankful, truthful, loving, free? How does it happen?

Well, it doesn't happen by taking the month of April and working on your patience. And taking May to work on your greed. And taking June to work on your lust. Nobody

ever becomes holy that way. You will just become frustrated. And besides you will run out of months before you run out of bad qualities. How does holiness happen? It happens by the Holy Spirit. The same Spirit who regenerates us makes us holy.

Let me give you an illustration. I am told that if you want to change a wild apple tree into a tree that produces really nice fruit, what you do is graft into that wild tree a limb from a cultivated tree. That doesn't happen all at once, but over time slowly, slowly the power of the sap from the cultivated limb will convert the whole wild apple tree into something good.

Jesus is the vine and we are the branches. As we live in dependence on the Holy Spirit, connecting with the Holy Spirit by praying and worshiping God, as we yield control to the Holy Spirit by a conscious choice, as we stop resisting the Holy Spirit but consciously come before him morning by morning and hour by hour we say, "Holy Spirit, I yield to you. I surrender to you. I won't resist you. I will follow your lead. I will submit to your thoughts. I will submit to your plans." the Holy Spirit makes you holy. He makes you look like Jesus.

The last thing that I see in terms of their experience of the Holy Spirit is what I call the saturating work of the Holy Spirit. Sanctifying is for the purpose of changing our character, but saturating is for the purpose of giving us power. Sanctifying is a gradual, slow on-going process. There is no instant sanctification. We don't get holiness. It is like that sap that runs in from the cultivated branch. We get holy over time, Christ-like over time. But saturating is an instantaneous, direct, sudden blast. Sanctifying is the Spirit's ordinary work. Saturating is his unusual extraordinary work. Too much of the church emphasizes the quiet work of the Holy Spirit like the still small voice with Elijah. But not the storm blast of God's sanctifying work.

I like what the preacher from Westminster Chapel in England, Martin Lloyd-Jones, said here by way of illustration. He said in a wonderful book called Joy Unspeakable that you can walk down a country road without an overcoat and walk through a light drizzle. Eventually, if you walk long enough through a light drizzle you will get thoroughly wet. And at other times you may go outside and encounter a cloud burst and get soaking wet in a matter of seconds. It is raining in both cases, but there is a world of difference between a drizzle and a downpour.

And what happened to the disciples in vv. 1-4 and then down in v. 17 is that they encountered a downpour. In fact, in v. 17 Peter quotes this exactly when he said, "In the last days God says I will pour out my Spirit on all people." Not I will drizzle on the church. I will drizzle or spit on your life. Rather, I will pour out my Spirit. "Your sons and daughters will prophesy. Your young men will see visions and your old men will dream dreams." Like the water that those Moroccan Jews poured out on one another, the Spirit was promised to be poured out. There was going to be a deluge, a spiritual drenching.

And near as I can figure out from the scriptures I see several distinct activities by the Spirit apart from regeneration. One is sanctifying for the purpose of changing our character. This process happens over a long period of time. But the second is saturating. What the book of Acts often calls filling for the purpose of providing power to accomplish God's activity. And it seems to me that you can have one activity of God in your life without the other. You can be sanctified without being saturated and you can be saturated without being sanctified. That is a person may be sanctified – they may be

Christ like in character, have felt God's Spirit, but have very little spiritual power for healing or for witness, for casting out demons or for prophesying – very mature, but little effectiveness, little power. Someone else could be saturated by the Spirit and accomplish great things for God and yet manifest very little of Christ's character. Do you feel God's presence in your life on a regular basis? Is anything in the way that you need to get out of the way through repentance?

I am convinced by the record in the book of Acts that God wants both. He wants us, in fact, to have it all – to suddenly experience his presence, to feel him, to come alive in him, to be sanctified by him and saturated by him. And so we pray, "Holy Spirit, come..."

Let's pray.